


# CHOPPER

## CUSTOM MOTORCYCLE CULTURE

Words and photography by  
Sandy 'Jake' Roca

SELF MADE



# SHOWING CLASS

Sandy 'Jake' Roca experienced the golden age of the chopper. He recalls the epic trip





eventy five years ago, a monumental event unfolded. The Allies won World War 2. Britain and Europe began the long road to rebuilding their war-pummelled economies, society and infrastructure. But America had largely escaped the ravages of the conflict. So, now what?

It was time to begin enjoying life again! It didn't happen overnight of course, but technology developed during the war began to trickle down into the American economy and a new postwar consumerism slowly started to snowball.

In the 1950s, things shifted into overdrive, particularly around cars. And nowhere was the new motor culture more pronounced and widespread than Southern California. A boatload of government money had poured into the economy during the war and a large youthful population were drawn there by that business. Now they had plenty of time to have fun and pursue dreams.

By the 1950s there were custom car clubs, magazines, events and shows. And it wasn't long before motorcycles began to be customised as well. There was another key factor at play here: returning soldiers. In the wake of World War 2, many Americans came back from overseas having experienced European motorcycles. These were generally more sporting than American offerings and the GIs had liked what they saw and rode.

So now they wanted a machine that was light and easy to handle. In effect, they wanted to convert large and heavy Harleys and Indians into something more like European bikes. They began to bob fenders, remove saddlebags, install smaller gas tanks – simplifying and decluttering existing domestic designs. These changes gave



**WELCOME TO THE 70s...**

*...A land of flares, forks and wild colours. This is a John Slingato build with Woody paint*

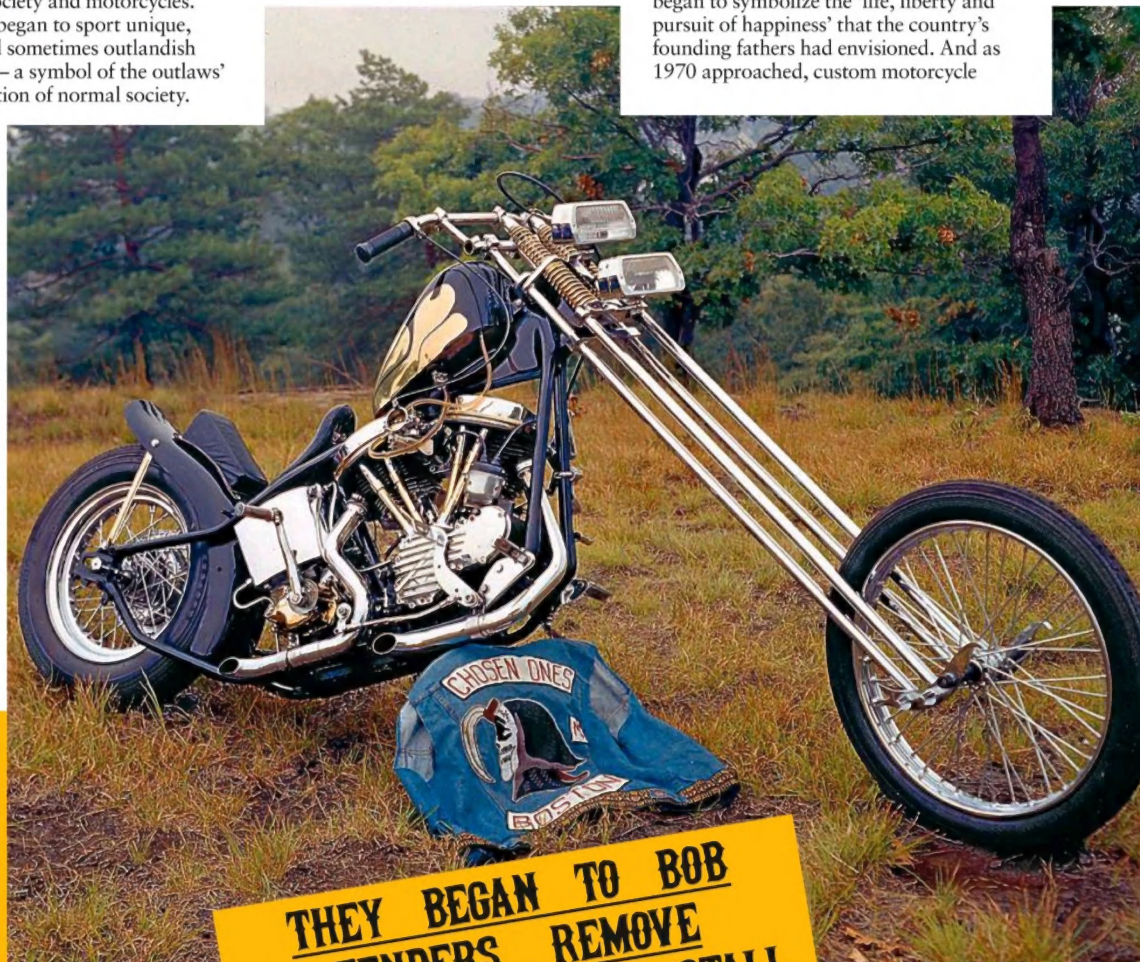


rise to the term 'bobber' and enlarged motorcycle customising from a custom car offshoot to a movement all its own.

Furthermore, the horrors of WW2 created a community of men totally changed by the brutality of combat. A certain percentage gravitated away from the mainstream and towards motorcycles, giving rise to outlaw motorcycle clubs made up of free thinkers in terms of their approach to society and motorcycles. Outlaw bikes began to sport unique, innovative and sometimes outlandish modifications – a symbol of the outlaws' rebellion rejection of normal society.

Then the Swinging Sixties ushered in an era where conformity was no longer the order of the day. A host of countercultures sprouted, espousing free love, folk music, psychedelic drugs and a universe of alternative thinking and ideas.

Sometime during the '60s, outlaw became cool and the venerable Harley-Davidson brand began to acquire a mystique all its own. Custom motorcycles increasingly began to symbolize the 'life, liberty and pursuit of happiness' that the country's founding fathers had envisioned. And as 1970 approached, custom motorcycle

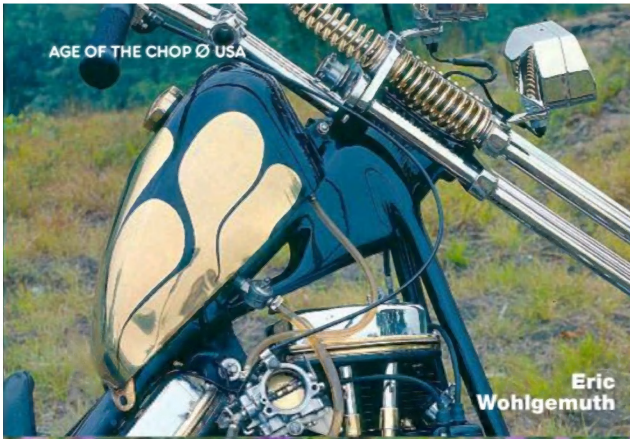


**THEY BEGAN TO BOB  
FENDERS, REMOVE  
SADDLEBAGS AND INSTALL  
SMALLER GAS TANKS**



**TOP:** Built by Paul Scanlon  
of the Chosen Few  
**LEFT:** By Dave Perewitz  
**RIGHT:** By Eric Wohlgemuth



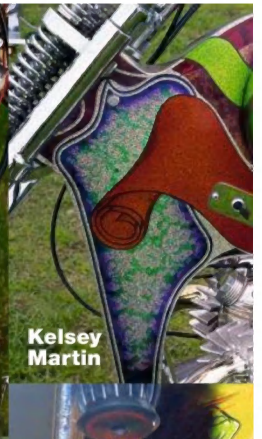


AGE OF THE CHOP © USA

Eric Wohlgemuth



Billy Martin



Kelsey Martin



Yosemite Sam Radoff



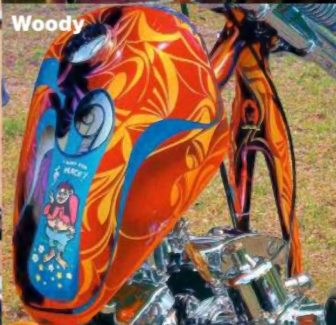
Horst



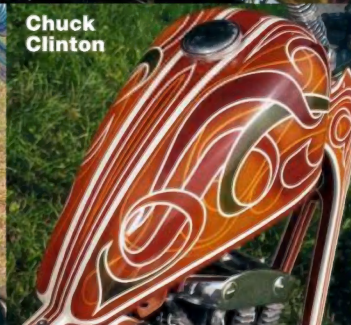
Tom Downey



Doc



Woody



Chuck Clinton



Woody





Kelsey Martin



Lenny Smith



Bill Shaw



Yosemite Sam Radoff



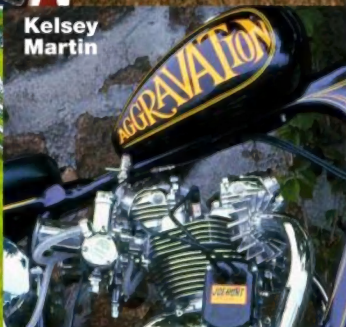
Don Hutchinson



Ron Finch



Gary the Brush Kuper

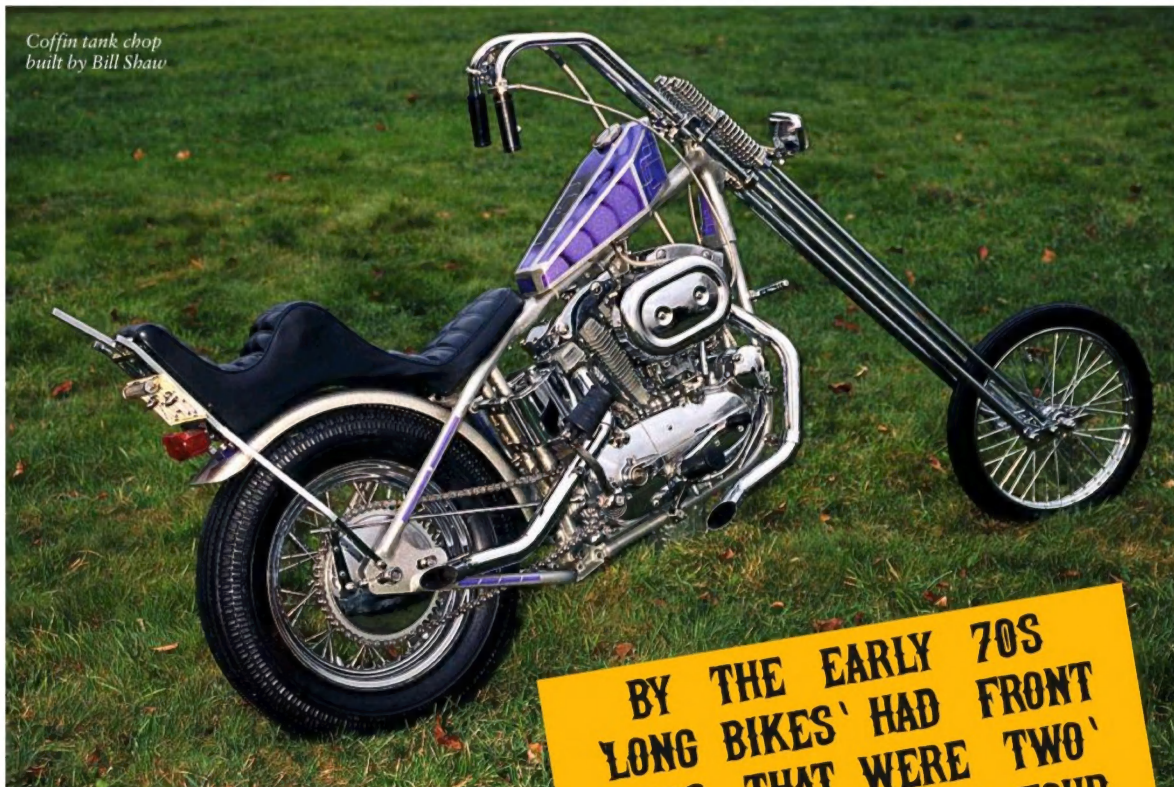


Kelsey Martin



Dave Perewitz





*Coffin tank chop  
built by Bill Shaw*

**BY THE EARLY 70S  
LONG BIKES' HAD FRONT  
ENDS THAT WERE TWO'  
THREE AND EVEN FOUR  
FEET LONGER THAN  
THE ORIGINALS**

#### **THE PERFECT CHOP**

*Long forks, high cissy  
bar, straight pipes and  
not much else: this chop  
is by Ron Pollini*



building snowballed. The outlaws and GIs had spawned the bobber and chopper.

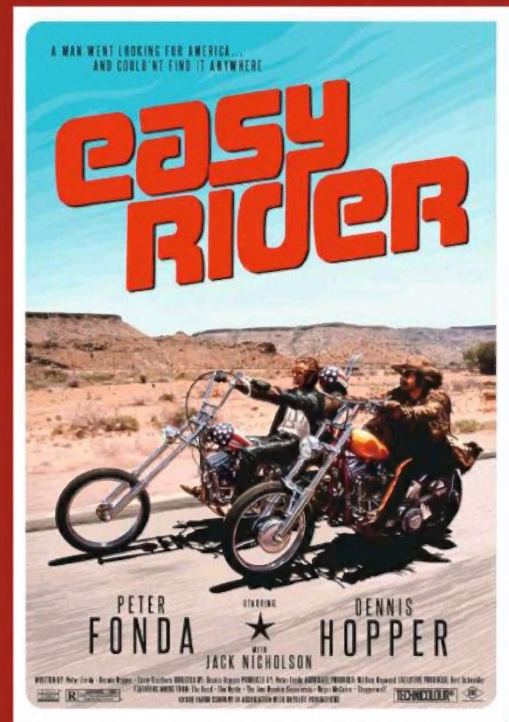
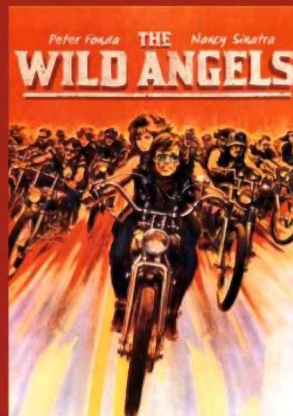
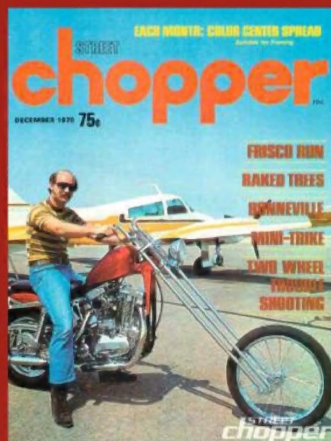
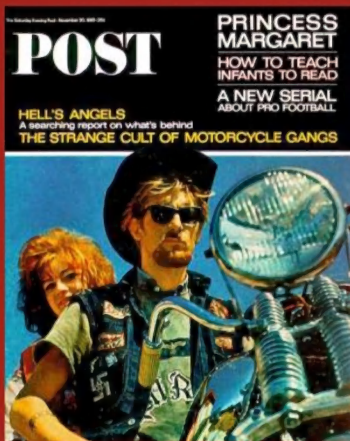
Chopping went a step beyond bobbing because it involved substantial frame modifications. If a frame was chopped and the rake was altered in the right way, it gave much steadier handling at highway speeds. Plus, it looked as cool as hell. Then someone realised that the fork on a Harley XA (a military WW2 surplus model) was almost two inches longer than a normal fork. And when installed on a standard bike, it had a rakish look.

Of course in America, if 'some' is good, then 'more' is better. A smart individual determined that radius rods from the suspension of a 1940 Ford car were just the right taper and diameter for extending the main legs of Harley forks. So it wasn't long before customisers were increasing the length of front forks much further than two inches. By the early 70s, so-called 'long bikes', were sporting front ends that were two, three and even four feet longer than the originals. The same trend happened with exhaust pipes and so-called sissy bars that supported the rear fender. The longer and higher the better!

These years were the heyday of the backyard builder as all the modifications had to be done by hand and that required some welding, machining and blacksmithing skills. People discovered you could get a good custom look by splicing and welding a Harley rigid rear section onto a Triumph frame. Others began to adapt old British girder forks to the front end of custom-built Harleys.

By the mid to late 1960s the newly-emerging custom motorcycle movement was about to rise up from the underground and go nationwide, big time and high profile. In 1966, Roger Corman produced and directed a movie called *The Wild Angels*. This was a





**THE SCENE EXPLODES**  
By the 70s, choppers were everywhere – Hollywood had picked up on their appeal, new specialist magazines appeared and outlaw culture was discussed by the middle classes. Choppers had gone mainstream





Shovel heads on  
Sportster motor,  
built by Dave  
Perevitz

**ANYONE WITH TOOLS  
AND A LITTLE  
APTITUDE COULD BOLT  
A CHOPPER TOGETHER**

full-on colour representation of custom Harley motorcycles, ridden by actual outlaw club members. What's more, it starred recognisable Hollywood personalities: Peter Fonda, Bruce Dern and Nancy Sinatra. Fonda rode a quintessential classic Harley chopper with extended front end, long exhaust pipes and a high sissy bar. It set the trend in the industry for many other B movies on the same subject. More and more people began to take note of custom motorcycle building and their builders.

Pouring gasoline on the fire was the 1969 movie *Easy Rider*, starring Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper. But the two chopped Harley motorcycles stole the show. And then came a raft of new custom magazines. Street Chopper, Easyriders, Big Bike and others began appearing on newsstands nationwide. How-to-do articles and lots of detailed mail order advertising for parts made things a lot easier – anyone with a little aptitude and a good set of tools could now bolt a chopper together.

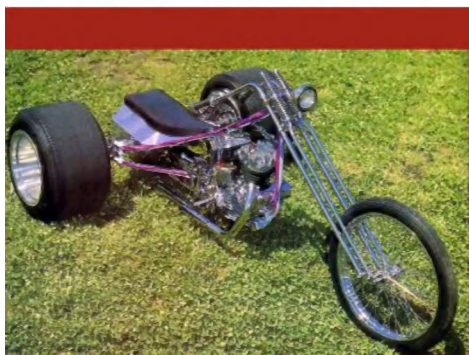
When I began photographing the subject in 1971, the transition of custom motorcycle creation from backyard building to buy it and bolt it together, was well underway. The choppers that appeared in the pages of the magazines were often a combination of both. The

artistic approaches ranged from heavy duty and utilitarian, to hard-edged outlaw, to the fancy and highly-decorated.

The youthful owners and builders of these bikes were just as diverse as their approaches. They were colourful characters that came from all walks of life and lifestyles. There was long hair, short hair and no hair. Tattoos and skin piercing were



**RIGHT:** Built by Ken Rosen  
**LEFT:** Immaculate trike  
chopper by Ken Randazzo







#### STATE OF THE ART

The range of styles that rolled out of workshops and sheds was endless. Builders such as Steve Stone (top left) and Dave Perewitz (bottom right) led the way





**Tony Wayne Frano**



**DC Cycle Worx**



**Don Dagesse**



**Lou Falcigno**



**Bob Page**



**DC Cycle Worx**





**Action Choppers**

#### OO LOOOOOONG

*Why stretch the forks by a couple of inches when you could go a couple of feet? Raked steering heads, stretched frames and strong forearms made these scoots rideable (just)*



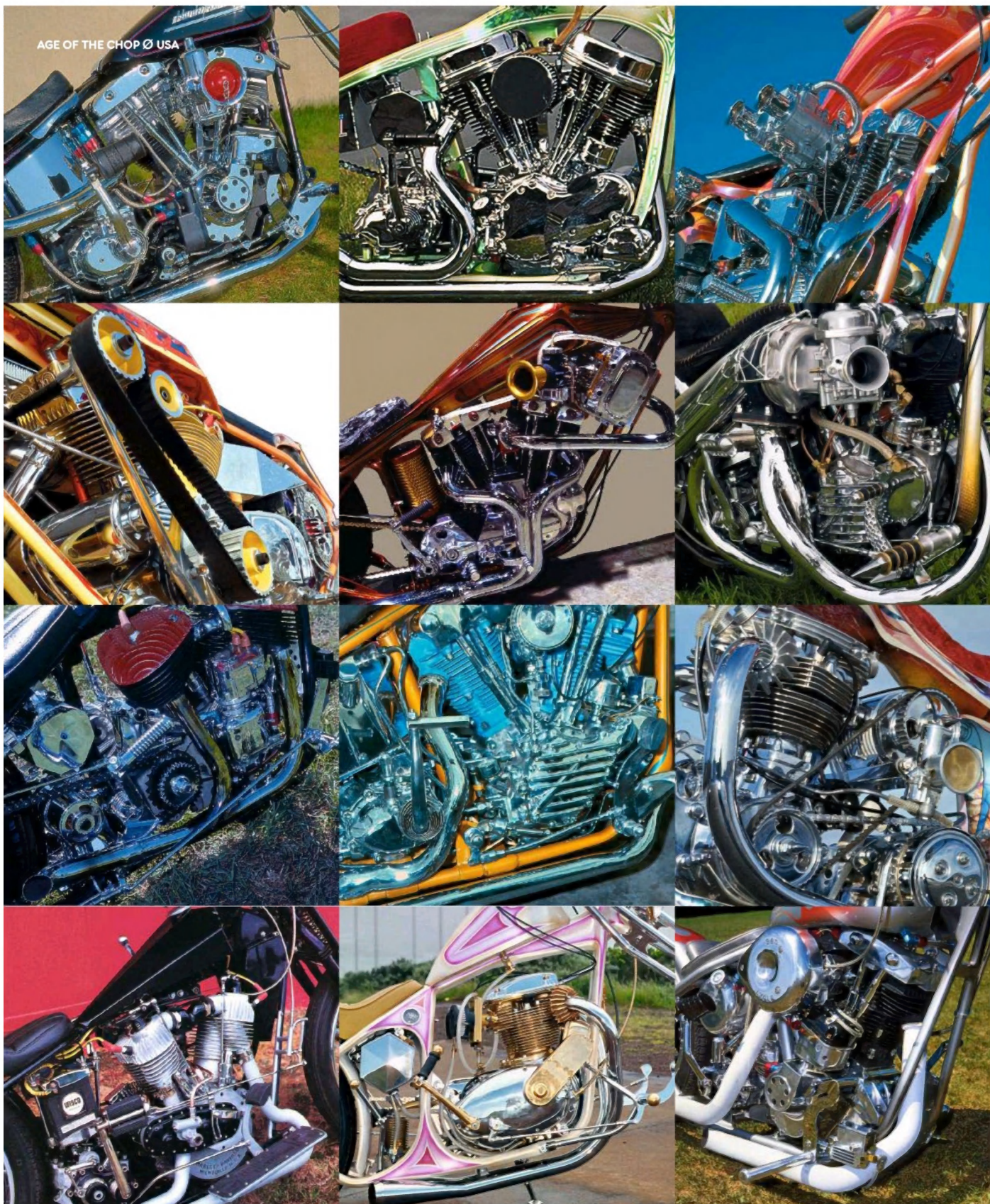
not uncommon. More than a few seemed to present themselves as bikers, hoodlums, gangsters, gearheads, greasers, playboys, or bon vivants. But to me they were all motorcycle builders.

One common thread among most of them was non-conformity, which remained in vogue throughout the early and middle 1970s. Choppers reflected an artistic statement of rebellion – a rejection of the mainstream, straight-arrow, uptight America. Many of these custom motorcyclists gave credit to the inspiring and iconoclastic lifestyle of outlaw motorcycle clubs and other early customisers from the 1950s and 60s.

A wide variety of custom-built motorcycles appeared in the lens of my camera. There were some common themes. The style was predominantly Harley or Harley influenced. Chopper fodder was often the Harley Sportster, the Harley big twin of 74cu in, and the British Triumph. The workmanship was generally impeccable. But occasionally a rat bike surfaced which had its own intentional cachet. I photographed custom-built motorcycles in a variety of configurations. There were 'long bikes' which had forks that were sometimes as long as the rest of the motorcycle. I encountered many functional and minimalist bobber style motorcycles. A digger style emerged that took its cue and looks from drag race machines. Many choppers clearly were inspired by outlaw motorcycle club modifications.

With no extensive bodywork like a car, the ultimate design centrepiece of choppers was the motor. Extensive engine modifications were an important ingredient in the custom bike recipe cookbook. Components were plated, engraved, shaved, vapour honed, chrome plated, anodized and altered in almost every way imaginable. Parts from different model year Harleys were substantially interchangeable and chopper builders took advantage of that. Quite often you would see late model, better-breathing heads on an earlier lower end. Single carb engines often got upgraded to dual. There were often conversions to fancy imported induction like the Weber 40DCOE or constant velocity SU. Supercharging and turbocharging were common.





#### **MORE THAN JUST LONG FORKS**

*Choppers inspired some radical engine modifications, including turbos, superchargers and SU carbs. Plus the engines themselves weren't all Harleys – there were plenty of Triumphs and Indians too*



*The Mystery Sled. Fuel tank by  
Dave Perewitz, build by Jake*



Primary drives were often left exposed. The fact that this was potentially dangerous to legs and feet only added to its cachet.

If anything rivalled these beautiful and outrageous chopper engines, it was the fuel tank. Customisers built, adopted and adapted designs in all sorts of shapes: peanut, coffin, wing and fat bob among them. The early Sportster tank, mounted low or mounted high, in what was called 'Frisco Style', was a favourite. What custom painters lacked in real estate compared to cars they more than made up for with the intensity of their designs on the gas tank. They lavished hours and hours on fantastically coloured, complex and mind-boggling designs. Metal flake paint reigned supreme for a while. Then there was a wave of transparent colour over a white pearlescent base. Elaborate pinstriping also outlined areas of different colours. Hand painted murals were often incorporated into the scheme. Going to a chopper run was a little like visiting a rolling art show.

The 1970s were the beginning – and also the end – of the first big wave of chopper motorcycles. Within a surprisingly few years choppers became accepted by many Americans. I remember reading with dread when one of the leading chopper magazines termed the movement a craze. In retrospect that was true and of course, all crazes eventually tend to fade.

The energy crisis and air pollution both took their toll on the custom motorcycle scene. Another trend that ended the craze was factory built customs, beginning with the 1969 Super Glide. Before long, chopper-like motorcycles were rolling out of the factories of Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki and others.

These siphoned off a significant percentage of people who would otherwise be building choppers or going to a chopper shop for a build. Of course they weren't true custom built choppers, but they were able to cut off a lot of oxygen to the excitement and growth of the chopper movement. And once these chopper-looking bikes could be had at any dealer showroom, choppers no longer really had the cachet of being a statement against conventional uptight society.

Many of those premier builders of the 1970s are no longer with us. Surprisingly, some who remain are still actively building and painting customs. Kelsey Martin who gained notoriety for building choppers out of Triumph motorcycles instead of Harleys, continues to ply his paint and fabrication craft. The famed Sportster customiser and painter Dave Perewitz is still going strong with frequent Harley big twin projects and restorations. Lou Falcigno still builds outrageously long and beautiful choppers. Ron Finch continues to build and decorate outrageously strange and beautiful motorcycles.

For me, the chopper's golden age is now almost five decades in the rear view mirror. It was a good ride while it lasted.

#### **KELSEY MARTIN**

*He was in at the  
beginning and is  
still going strong*



## **STILL OUT THERE**

**A few of the old guard are still hard at it.  
In no particular order:**

Kelsey Martin  
[www.kelseyskustoms.com](http://www.kelseyskustoms.com)  
Dave Perewitz  
[www.perewitz.com](http://www.perewitz.com)  
Art Himsl  
[www.arthimsl.com](http://www.arthimsl.com)  
Lou Falcigno, C & L Hog Shop  
+1 772-464-5623  
Ron Finch  
[www.finchscustoms.com](http://www.finchscustoms.com)  
Horst  
[www.horstcycleart.com](http://www.horstcycleart.com)  
Mondo Porras  
[www.denverschoppers.com](http://www.denverschoppers.com)  
Sugar Bear  
[www.sugarbearchoppers.com](http://www.sugarbearchoppers.com)